



Duque reaches the halfway mark

by Andrew Thompson

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What happened?

Iván Duque, Colombia's right-wing President, was due to celebrate reaching the half-way point in his four-year term on 7 August.

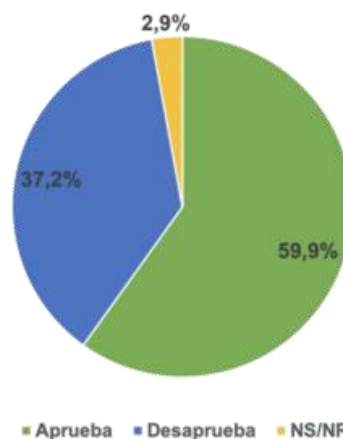
The details

There are different assessments over how well – or badly – Duque is doing. Addressing a new session of Congress, he said his aim was to “prevent the [coronavirus] pandemic from destroying the path we have taken together to close social gaps”. This shows how much has changed as a result of COVID-19. Before the pandemic Duque looked like a traditional “neo liberal” fiscal hawk. Opponents who went on widespread anti-government protests late last year believed he was completely uninterested in reducing inequality and in closing any social gaps whatsoever.

Now however, a leader we could call “Duque Model 2” says he is seriously concerned over inequality. He is promising to maintain an emergency monthly “solidary income” payment to the country's poorest families, of 160,000 pesos (US\$44) until at least June 2021 (that will be not too distant from presidential elections due in 2022). Emergency economic stimulus measures taken this year add up to around US\$28bn or 8.5% of GDP. The draft budget for next year proposes to increase spending by 8.3%, to boost



¿Aprueba o desaprueba usted la gestión realizada por el Gobierno del Presidente Iván Duque?



Green = approval, Blue = disapproval, Orange = Don't know/no response.
Source: April 2020 Guarumo/EcoAnalítica poll of voting-age Colombians

infrastructure, and to create jobs. The government aims to run a fiscal deficit next year equivalent to 5.1% of GDP. For now, the rhetoric of fiscal austerity has been put on pause.

It can be argued that Duque has moved to the centre and this is helping him politically. Certainly, he has done well during the pandemic. According to Guarumo/Ecoanalítica the president's approval rating has surged from a low of 34% in May last year to nearly 60% in July. However, there is a lot that could and may still go wrong. The pandemic is far from defeated and could yet expose weak points in the government response. The arrest of Duque's one-time mentor, former president Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), on witness tampering and fraud allegations, may have spill over effects on the government. Duque himself faces allegations of vote-buying in the 2018 elections and relies on regional alliances with sometimes dubious political and family "clans". His critics see him as ambiguous over the peace settlement with the former FARC guerrillas and unwilling to talk peace with the still-active ELN. Drug trafficking and human rights violations continue in rural Colombia. Duque also has to contend with a hostile and volatile neighbour – Venezuela. In addition, if he seeks re-election in 2022 he will also have to contend with potentially strong centre-left rivals (such as Bogota mayor Claudia López, who is also doing well in the ratings).

What does it mean?

Duque can stake a claim to having one of the better responses to the coronavirus crisis among Latin American leaders. But these are still comparatively early days in his presidency. The next two years will show whether he has a realistic chance of winning a second term in 2022-2026.

About the Author

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As well as being a Canning House Associate Fellow, Andrew is a former foreign correspondent (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro) and a broadcaster for the BBC's Latin American Service. Working through La Rambla Research Ltd., he writes about economics, political risk, and business in Latin America.



These stories are also available on Andrew's blog site, [La Rambla Research](#).